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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

THE RISE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION WORK

A radio talk by C. W. Warburton, Extension Service, delivered in the Department of Agriculture, period, National Farm and Home Hour, Tuesday, May 8, 1934.

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Twenty years ago today President Wilson signed the Smith-Lever Act, which authorized the creation of a national extension system of practical education for rural people. What brought about the Smith-Lever Act? Briefly, the situation was this. Scientific research had piled up valuable knowledge in the United States Department of Agriculture and the State Agricultural colleges and experiment stations that was not being put to use on the farm. The farmer and the farm woman needed these advanced ideas, but needed them translated into terms of their everyday experience and requirements. The Smith-Lever Act provided the means for carrying on this type of education. It put on a National basis demonstration work that had already been carried on in some of the States since 1904.

This demonstration work really began with the efforts to fight an insect. About 1900 the cotton crop of the South was threatened by the invasion from Mexico of the boll weevil. In 1904, Congress made an appropriation to the Department of Agriculture to combat this insect. For certain features of this work the then Secretary of Agriculture, James Wilson, chose one of his old associates, Dr. Seaman A. Knapp. Doctor Knapp soon became convinced that the boll weevil could not be eradicated and that the practical thing to do was to learn how to live with it by assisting farmers to continue to grow cotton by methods which would reduce the damage caused by this insect. Doctor Knapp was a thorough believer in the kind of education that teaches by doing. He established a series of practical farm demonstrations where farmers grew cotton and other crops on their own farms under the supervision of men appointed by him. These itinerant teachers soon became so popular that some of the leading cotton counties employed men to give all their time to working with the farmers in the county and thus the job of county agricultural agent developed. Extension work with rural women and with boys and girls naturally followed.

The demonstration method of teaching was so successful in the cotton belt that the idea soon spread to other sections and within a few years there was demand in Congress for legislation which would place this demonstration work on a national basis. The Smith-Lever Act was the result of this popular demand. Under its provisions a system of cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics was established in all of the States and in most of the agricultural counties. These extension agents are supported by Federal, State and county funds.

Today there are 2,738 county agricultural agents working with the farmers and farm boys, and 1,264 home demonstration agents working with farm women and farm girls in approximately 2,750 of the 2,900 agricultural counties in the United States. The supervisory staff and the specialists bring the total to 6,103 extension workers. These agents are helping farmers, farm women, farm boys and girls, to solve their problems. They are giving these problems sympathetic and intelligent attention, they are assisting farm people to demonstrate how to do things in a better way.

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The extension program is not a readymade program worked out by college professors or by extension agents and offered to farmers and their families. Rather, it is one which is developed cooperatively by the extension agents and leading farm men and women in the county who sit down together for a study of their problems and work out means for their solution. No problem connected with rural life has been too large or too small to receive careful attention. Perhaps the most significant accomplishment during the past two decades of extension work has been the stimulation of rural people--farm men and farm women, boys and girls-- to think for themselves and become better informed on the daily problems of the farm and the home. They have learned to analyze their own resources and to make the best possible use of these resources.

During the past twenty years, many emergency farm situations have confronted the county extension agents. The problems presented by droughts, floods, hurricanes, insect invasions, falling commodity prices, have engaged the attention of extension workers in one part of the country or another. When the occasion arises the extension forces adjust their programs to meet the emergency. For instance, during the past two or three years home demonstration workers have given a large part of their time to relief activities, while agricultural agents in many states have given practically all their time during the past year to the agricultural adjustment program. The accomplishments in that field are too fresh in the minds of most of you to require any review here. Even now, however, the regular extension program is going forward. More than 900,000 rural boys and girls are enrolled in 4-H Clubs and hundreds of thousands of practical demonstrations are being carried on by adult farm men and women.